

Decay of moral judgement in "a hanging" by george orwell

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



The disregard for all ethical expectations of humanity can be a result of the pressure to execute one's job regardless of the consequences for those in one's vicinity. This was often the case in Europe during the 1900s when the death sentence was still a frequent form of punishment. This decay of moral judgement and desensitization to the killing of other human beings is epitomized in George Orwell's essay, "A Hanging", which revolves around his time spent enforcing capital punishment in Burma under British rule.

Orwell contends that the implementation of capital punishment causes those working for the justice system to stray from humanity and moral values by dehumanizing fellow citizens. Due to his personal experience with this issue, Orwell conveys his opinion on these deleterious effects of capital punishment through his effective use of contrast, irony and symbolism.

Orwell illustrates how capital punishment can cause those executing it to deviate from ethical and moral behaviour through his use of contrast; especially between the prisoners and the guards' physical appearance and living standards. Firstly, Orwell's comparison of the prisoners' cells to "small animal cages", which contained nothing but "a plank for a bed and a pot of drinking water", illustrates the dehumanization of the convicts and the deplorable living conditions they endured. Moreover, the "puny wisp of a man" who was to be killed juxtaposed to the "fat Dravidian in a white drill suit" exemplifies the superiority of the guards over the prisoners and the drastic disparity in living conditions. The discernible differences between the imperious guards and the docile prisoners are ironic since some of the guards are of the same ethnicity as those they are executing. Furthermore, the contrast between Orwell's belief about the "wrongness, of cutting a life

short" and wanting to " kill him quickly [and] get it over" with, conveys how the guards' occupation required them to suppress their moral values.

Additionally, the solemn atmosphere and guilty tone before the prisoner's death where the guards had " gone grey like bad coffee" contrasted with the breakfast, where " everyone [was] chattering gaily", clearly portrays how the execution of capital punishment desensitizes those working under the government to the killing of fellow citizens. Orwell's extensive use of contrast presents his criticism on capital punishment and the deleterious effects it has on those working for it.

Additionally, the use of irony throughout the essay enables Orwell to demonstrate how those working for capital punishment suppress their moral values and sense of compassion. First, the irony of the prisoner stepping " aside to avoid a puddle", although he was approaching his death, reminds the narrator that he was " alive, just as [everyone else was] alive". Orwell's incorporation of this action is vital as it triggered the narrator's compassionate and moral side, that were inconspicuous prior to this moment. Subsequently, it demonstrates how the guards were usually quite oblivious to what they were doing because it had developed into an insipid routine. Furthermore, after the execution, the superintendent poked the body and declared him " all right" despite the fact that he was dead and thus the opposite of all right. This ironic statement demonstrates how the lives of the prisoners became obsolete to those enforcing capital punishment, because their job numbed them to the killing of other humans. Moreover, the guards all laughed at a recollection of a time before a prisoner's execution

where they had told him to “ think of all the pain and trouble [he was] causing [them]”, which is utterly ironic since they were escorting him to his death. This callous statement and the apathetic response border on cynicism, furthering the notion that those executing the death sentence become oblivious to the significance and severity of their jobs. Additionally, the fact that the dog “ whine[d]” during the prisoner’s repeated cries and acted more compassionately and humane than the humans, who acted indifferent and simply wanted to complete their assignment, is ironic and blatantly conveys Orwell’s criticism on the effect capital punishment has on those implementing it. Orwell’s pervasive use of irony is essential in expressing his opposition to capital punishment, since it obliterates humaneness from those enforcing it.

Furthermore, Orwell’s integration of symbolism exposes how external influences affect one’s actions and beliefs, and in this case desensitize one to the killing of others. One of the main symbols in this essay is the stray dog that appears on the march to the gallows. The dog is a mix breed of a Pariah, which is a free Burmese dog, and an Argail, which is a British colonial dog, and thus represents the guards, many of whom are originally Indian but have been greatly influenced by the British. Moreover, the dog symbolizes the guards’ consciousness and sympathy, as it “ whine[d]” harmoniously with the prisoner’s cries, and “[looked] timorously out at [the guards]” after they killed another human. However, since the dog also symbolizes innocence and purity, but ended up “[slipping] after [the guards]” when the killing was over, it demonstrates how those implementing capital punishment have

gradually been desensitized to the killings and are compelled to follow orders. Moreover, the dog was filled “with glee” and “jump[ed] up [trying] to lick [the prisoner’s] face” conveying how all humans are equal and should be treated as such. Additionally, the “sickly light, like yellow tinfoil” that shined into the jail yard symbolizes how inhumane and ‘sick’ the happenings in the prison were. Orwell reiterates how beneath the appearance both the prisoners and guards are human and equal through his use of symbolism of the guard’s “black hand” and the prisoners’ “brown backs”. Orwell’s symbolism is vital in understanding how capital punishment can have detrimental effects on society, especially for those enforcing it.

Orwell clearly portrays the corrupting effects of capital punishment on the minds of those executing it as well as those it physically victimizes. Consequently, he indicates how this brutal and inhumane prosecution system can numb people to killings of fellow citizens. Similar to Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant”, those working for the imperialists feel pressured to perform their job the way they are expected, despite their moral judgement or what the consequences of their actions are. Furthermore, a justice system that gives some people immense power over other people not only harms the minds and perceptions of those involved, but also segregates a society. As a liberal socialist, Orwell believes in the equality of all citizens, and hence denounces capital punishment for the damaging psychological effects on those involved in the process.